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ABSTRACT

Holt High School (Michigan) has implemented a school to work transition for its 1,200 students, including 120 students with mild to severe disabilities. The Holt Transition System is based on a taxonomy of five domains: student development, student-focused planning, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure and attributes. The system includes a School-To-Work Mentorship Program, taught as an elective by collaborating general education and special education teachers. It offers planned, comprehensive, community-based experiences. Adults and agencies from the community share information about careers and help in individual vocational assessment. School personnel and students develop a career plan and acquire basic vocational skills. Students with learning and behavioral challenges are provided with a job coach. To investigate program effects, the interviews and journals of 25 students (8 with disabilities, 7 at-risk, and 10 nondisabled) were analyzed as were reflective papers of core team members. Results indicated the program had important effects on students' employability, social skills, and self-determination skills. The importance of specific supports and services was confirmed, including shared vision by parents, teachers, employers, and agency personnel; provision of a variety of experiences with accommodations in different occupations; willingness to collaborate; administration support; a job coach for students with disabilities and at-risk students; and support from nondisabled peers. (Contains 21 references.) (DB)

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IMPACTS OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAM

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IMPACTS OF AN INCLUSIVE SCHOOL-TO-WORK PROGRAM

Since the 1980s, educators, businesses, and policy makers have been investigating and developing School-To-Work transition programs in order to improve the postsecondary outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities and at-risk. Recent legislation (i.e., The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992) has reinforced the importance of the transition from school to adult life and has mandated that schools develop transition plans for students with disabilities. The School-To-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 (Public Law 103-239) provides a national framework to help states and local communities develop comprehensive, inclusive school-to-work programs to serve the transition needs of all students. All of these laws have refocused high schools and adult service delivery agencies from systems to individuals (Kohler, 1996). A new "consumer-oriented" educational and service delivery paradigm is based on individual interests, abilities, options, and self-determination (Wehmeyer, 1992).

School-To-Work programs are expected to provide opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities, minority youths, women, and at-risk students (National Transition Network, 1994). School-To-Work programs are allegedly being developed for all students to plan for the highly skilled careers. However, in practice, students with disabilities have had limited access to these programs because of their poor social skills, academic failure, and poor attendance. The majority of students with disabilities and at-risk enrolled in grade 10 could not qualify for entry into a local School-To-Work program, even with its modest entry requirements of a C average and 85% attendance (Goldberger, 1993). This

practice situation has continued serious implications for the future of the American economy given that Harris (1987) found that 63% of working-age persons with disabilities are unemployed.

A number of researchers recently have concentrated their efforts on investigating School-To-Work components that predict postschool success (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Clark & Kolstoe, 1995; Edgar & Polloway, 1994). Benz and his colleagues found that competitive employment for students with and without disabilities was enhanced by (a) having two or more work experiences during the last two years of high school, (b) exiting school with high social skills, (c) exiting school with high job-search skills, and (d) having no continuing vocational instruction needs one year out of school. That is, students who scored high on the variables mentioned above were two or three times more likely than others to be competitively employed one year out of school. Early employment experiences are very influential in the success that young adults with disabilities experience in the job market. These experiences shape the basic work skills and behaviors of these youths, which remain with them throughout their work careers (Freeman & Wise, 1982). However, a gap exists between educational research and practice in the development of transition systems in schools. Although both high schools and agencies realize that transition planning for all students is important, they both continue to struggle with the implementation of such systems.

Holt High School is a suburban school with a population of 1,200 students, including 120 students with disabilities from severe to mild in all categories in grades 10 through 12. In response to the above mentioned mandates and the concerns of educators, community agencies, parents, and students, Holt High School formed a Transition Coalition in October

1994 with the support of a federal restructuring grant (# H023R20010) funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to develop a system of transition for all students. This coalition has been successful in forming a collaborative partnership among the school, parents, community, alternative education, service agencies, and businesses to develop a Transition System that includes a School-To-Work Mentorship Program for all students, including those at risk and with disabilities.

The Holt Transition System is based on a taxonomy developed by Kohler (1994), which includes five major domains: student development, student-focused planning, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structure and attributes. The student development domain includes instruction in life skills, instruction in employment skills, career and vocational curricula, structured work experience, vocational assessment, and accommodations and support. The student-focused planning domain incorporates individualized education program (IEP) development, student participation, and accommodations and planning strategies. The interagency collaboration domain contains an interorganizational framework and collaborative service delivery. The family involvement domain includes family training and family empowerment. The program structure and attributes domain details program philosophy, strategic planning, program evaluation, and human resource development.

In spring 1995, a core team of the Transition Coalition developed a pilot program of an inclusive School-To-Work Mentorship Program as part of the Holt Transition System. A team of two general education and two special education teachers taught the program. Objectives of the program were to provide opportunities for students:

- to explore their own vocational interests, abilities, and aptitudes.
- to develop the skills necessary for future employment and to explore career options.
- to practice self-advocacy skills at the worksite.
- to develop transition plans based on individual needs and goals.

The School-To-Work Mentorship Program was designed as an elective class that is open to all high school students. Since the 1995-96 school year, diverse populations of students, including honor and average students, students with disabilities, and alternative education students, have enrolled in the program. It offers a planned, comprehensive, community-based experience for students and employers to work and learn together. Adults from various businesses shares with the students information about their careers through class presentations and a Career Exploration Fair. Agencies support a vocational assessment for all students to determine their career interests and preferences. School personnel help the students develop a career plan and acquire basic vocational skills, such as skills in writing a resume, keyboarding, and interviewing. Project team teachers provide support to employers and students in the workplace through frequent site visits. Students with learning and behavioral challenges are provided with a job coach through the local rehabilitation services agency. The role of the job coach is to help the student develop a plan to address the area of concern. In addition, the coach helps the employer to understand the student's disability as it applies to the situation and to offer the appropriate support. In most cases, the role of the job coach is to provide initial support to both the employer and the student employee, and then fade his or her support.

Through this partnership, students learn to advocate and employers learn to accommodate by allowing access to their businesses and facilitating success within the

workplace. In addition, business people have the opportunity to develop future employees in partnership with the school and community agencies. The students, high school teachers, and sometimes employers participate in weekly debriefing sessions to discuss issues and concerns that students are experiencing in the work place. Students' progress and the development of their career plans are discussed in parent conferences and transition planning meetings.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of this inclusive School-To-Work program on students. Three research questions were posed: (a) What are the effects of an inclusive work-based mentorship program on students? (b) What the supports and services are necessary to help the success of students with disabilities in the work place? and (c) What are business people's perceptions and concerns regarding the mentoring of students with disabilities? To investigate the effects of the program, 25 students' interviews and journals (eight students with disabilities, seven at-risk students, and ten nondisabled students), 12 employers' interviews, and ten project core team members' reflective papers were analyzed during the 1996-97 school year.

Research Findings

Effects of an Inclusive School-to-Work Program

In their interviews and journals, the 25 students reported that, after participating in an inclusive School-To-Work program, they could:

* clarify their work-adjustment issues .
* strengthen their career interest.
* establish life goals and future plans.
* develop a stronger sense of their individual strengths.
* develop a stronger sense of responsibility.

From their work experiences, students perceived the following factors to be important for succeeding in work places:

* a friendly and polite attitude toward employers, customers, and co-workers.
* commitment to a job.
* a high level of self-determination.
* social skills (interacting with others in a responsible and mature manner).
* efficient time management.
* high self-motivation.
* perfect attendance and punctuality.
* support from family, especially parents.
* trustworthiness and honesty as a team member.
* neat physical appearance.
* following the rules of the company.

These students' self-reports were similar to the findings from previous research. Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) mentioned that direct efforts must be made to improve the social skills of all students by providing curriculum-based lessons in social skills and social/cognitive problem solving. Wehmeyer and Schwartz (1997) identified self-determination as a critical outcome of the transition process for students with disabilities. Students wanted to improve their performance as employees in the following areas:

* Working with others cooperatively as a team member.
* Improving self-advocacy skills (e.g., sharing ideas, feelings, and values; asking for help whenever needed).
* Monitoring their own performance.
* Negotiating with others in a polite manner (communication skills).
* Forming close personal relationships with supervisors and employers.
* Improving social skills (e.g., making friends, humor, smiling).

From the ten core team members' reflective papers, it was evident that the inclusive School-To-Work program had had important effects on students' employability, social skills, and self-determination skills. First, as a result of the program students had a much greater understanding of what is expected in the work place in terms of job skills, work ethics,

responsibility, punctuality, time management, quality work, and problem solving. They had learned about the world of work in real-life, hands-on situations, with real people. Second, the students in the program had gained a sense of direction for their lives; they had gained a sense of focus. They seemed to be awakening up to new experiences that were allowing them to think about their future, and, in turn, they were beginning to make thoughtful decisions about their school experiences. The program had been very valuable to students, both in confirming and denying their career interests. Third, the students in the program had improved in their abilities to communicate and interact with adults and to operate successfully in the world of work. Fourth, students had a greater ability to advocate for themselves in terms of what they needed. Students were taking more initiative in forming relationships with adult agencies, asking questions, scheduling appointments, and taking risks in trying new things. Fifth, the students were strengthening their self-esteem and had a sense of confidence about their abilities and strengths. They wanted to contribute their strengths in the world of work. The close attention from mentors was invaluable in improving students' confidence.

Supports and Services

The 10 core team members suggested important supports and services that are necessary to help students with disabilities succeed in the work place. First, students, parents, teachers, employers, and agency people should share a vision and belief for an inclusive School-To-Work program. Furney, Hasazi, and DeStefano (1997) also emphasized the role of shared values and beliefs in creating an environment conducive to the

implementation of inclusive School-To-Work policies and practices. All of the institutions and agencies whose mission is to develop youths of today for tomorrow's work force must collaborate to develop a comprehensive transition system. No single institution or agency has the resources or capacity to do the job alone.

Second, employers should provide a variety of experiences in different occupations with accommodations (e.g., assistive technology). Employers should learn about students with disabilities and accommodations they need. School-To-Work programs succeed or fail on the strength of employer participation.

Third, commitment and willingness of the core team to collaborate with agencies and businesses are essential for developing a network.

Fourth, the school administration should support an inclusive School-To-Work program. Learning needs to be expanded beyond the classroom. In addition, they should not ignore the educational needs of non-college-bound students. They should plan curriculums both to prepare students for college and to prepare students for employment in the community. The goal to ensure a successful transition from high school to adult life for students with disabilities will require major changes in schools, adult services, and communities. Such changes should include an increased effort on the part of high schools to provide appropriate services and curriculum options for students with disabilities, expansion of collaborative planning and service delivery efforts between schools and human service agencies, and the development and expansion of community networks and options for people with disabilities (Furney, et al., 1997; Nisbet, Covert, & Schuh, 1992).

Fifth, it is important to provide students with disabilities and at-risk students a job coach to help them learn how to deal appropriately with frustrations on the job appropriately and to learn the social skills necessary to deal with people in the work place.

Finally, support from nondisabled peers in an inclusive School-To-Work program is important because at-risk students and those with disabilities need mature role models and a great deal of encouragement and emotional support. Educational programs and instructional activities need to offer students opportunities to develop the skills to work cooperatively and problem solve about real world issues in heterogeneous groups about real world issues. These situations assist them in developing the skills they need for success in the work place in the Twenty-first century. Benz, Yovanoff, and Doren (1997) proposed that an inclusive School-To-Work program should include the following features: (a) options for multiple pathways and time-frames, (b) reasonable accommodations and support services, (c) relevant performance indicators, and (d) adequate training and technical assistance for all personnel.

Employers' Perceptions

Contrary to the finding of the recent Census Bureau survey of employers conducted for the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce -- that employers were extremely negative about young, new workers (Applebome, 1995) -- the employers who participated in the Holt School-To-Work Mentorship Program were willing to support high school students, including those with disabilities, in their development of basic work skills, thinking skills, and personal qualities. Employers reported that the students were outstanding in:

* following age-appropriate directions.
* working with others cooperatively toward a common goal.
* demonstrating punctuality.
* notifying employers of tardiness or absence.
* completing job tasks on time and according to specifications.
* learning new tasks or skills receptively.

The employers reported that they deepened their commitment to the School-To-Work program over time as they interacted and worked with young people. They also reported that participation in School-To-Work programs will have some immediate rewards for employers. In many settings, students became productive workers quite quickly, adding value for participating employers. In addition, existing workers who supervised young people and served them as mentors improved their management skills and increased attention to developing their own skills. These findings were similar to the results from other studies results (Goldberger & Kazis, 1996; Goldberger, Kazis, & O'Flanagan, 1994; Kopp, Kazis, & Churchill, 1995). The employers indicated that students need to improve in:

* asking for help when a situation requires assistance.
* keeping busy during working hours.
* taking responsibility for their own learning.

Implications for Practice

On the basis of the findings from this study, there are major implications for developing, implementing, and evaluating an inclusive School-to-Work program. First, elements of an inclusive School-to-Work program, like career exploration, should begin in earlier grades in order to be fairly successful for all students, especially students with disabilities and those who are at-risk. Second, work-based learning should be an integral part of the core curriculum for all students because it yields benefits that school-based education

alone cannot provide. Third, self-determination skills such as goal setting, problem solving, and self-advocacy need to be developed for all students in middle school to strengthen their School-To-Work experiences. Fourth, the strength of these programs is greatly enhanced if they are developed by a coalition of educators, businesses, community members, and agencies. Fifth, if School-To-Work programs are jointly taught by general and special education faculty, students will have more positive perceptions about participating in these programs. Sixth, to develop a continuum of work-based learning available to all students, schools and communities need to generate a variety of structured work experiences such as apprenticeships, internships, paid work experiences, mentorships, and job shadowing. Finally businesses, with the support of schools and service agencies, need to be encouraged to mentor at-risk students and those with disabilities in the work and social skills necessary for full employment in high-paying jobs in the Twenty-first century.

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